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Editorial

A QUESTION OF VALUE

It would be difficult to name a question more fundamental for moral life, and more important to be considered precisely at this time, than the question of the ultimate values of life. Is it men or things that are supremely valuable? The question may be approached from two points of view. In which direction does the experience of the centuries point? What have the men of deepest moral insight thought? For the present we will leave it to the historian and the sociologist to answer the question from the first point of view, and ask only: What was the thought of Jesus, that man of all the centuries most endowed with insight into moral questions?

Jesus has something to say upon this question. He met it and answered it, for example, when the Pharisees complained of his disciples for plucking grain on the sabbath day. Over against the claims of a sacred day to sacred observance were set the needs of hungry men. As between these two, a sacred institution and the common needs of common men, Jesus gave his voice for men. He did not stop to question the Pharisees' interpretation of the Old Testament law, however much he may have dissented from it. He went to the heart of the question by at once declaring that when the claims of a sacred day were opposed by the claims of human need, the former must yield to the latter. That this was really his point of view, that he had in mind a general principle, and was not simply expressing a judgment concerning the sabbath, is interestingly

shown by the argument by which he sustained his position: "Have you never read what David did when he was hungry and they that were with him, how he went into the house of God and did eat the shew bread, which was not lawful for him to eat nor those that were with him, but only for the priests?" Here there is no mention of the sabbath. He illustrates and supports the general principle by reference to another case of a sacred institution, the tabernacle, the rights of which are set over against the common needs of common men. Jesus' voice is with David's for the needs of men in preference to the claims of a sacred house and sacred bread.

It is the same principle that underlies his conduct in another case in which at first sight he seems to act on the contrary principle. Finding, in the temple at the Passover season, men selling oxen and sheep and doves, and money-changers sitting at their tables, he drove out the oxen and sheep, and overturned the tables of the money-changers. At first sight this seems to have been zeal for a sacred house, for an institution, for a thing; not for men. But a little reflection will show that this is not really the case. It was in the court of the gentiles that this traffic was carried on—that court into which alone of all the courts of the temple the gentiles might come and share in some measure in the Jews' worship of the living God. Long before this, the prophet had recognized this function of the Jewish nation and the Jewish temple when, speaking for Jehovah, he said: "My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations." But the priests had permitted this court to be converted into a place of traffic. It was not the traffic that was illegitimate; it was indeed necessary, if sacrifice was to be offered and the temple tax paid in Jewish coins. It was not the place that was intrinsically sacred. Jesus' words concerning David and the tabernacle exclude this interpretation of his action. The crime that aroused his indignation was that for the sake of a money profit, or it may be for the sake of facilitating the offering of sacrifices, men were debarred from that which might have become to them a house of prayer, a place of approach to God, an opportunity for worship of God.

The principle runs all through Jesus' life. Let another example suffice. The Pharisees complained that he allowed his disciples to eat with unwashen hands, thus violating the tradition of the elders

which required that, to avoid all possibility of eating even a small particle of anything unclean which might cling to the tips of one's fingers, a man should wash his hands before eating. Jesus defended the practice of his disciples on the principle that not that which enters into a man defiles him, but that which goes forth from him; not that which he eats, but that which he says and does. The evangelist notes the fact that in this saying Jesus made all meats clean. For, in truth, this principle completely cuts the ground from under, not only the pharisaic tradition, but the whole Old Testament law concerning foods. Again, it is the needs of man, as revealed in his nature, that are set over against hoary tradition and sacred law, and given the preference over tradition and law. Because in fact eating does not defile a man morally, the law which commands a religious distinction between foods is unadapted to his nature, and unuseful for his development. In the face of this antithesis, Jesus chooses without hesitation that which is for the interest of man.

Over against institutions, things, though they be ever so sacred—a sacred day, a sacred house, a sacred law—Jesus sets up the common needs of common men—hunger for food, hunger for God. Not alone when these sacred things stand in the way of his highest spiritual needs, but even when they interfere with the satisfaction of his legitimate physical needs, does Jesus unhesitatingly set aside things for men. The spiritual he did indeed put above material. He could forget his own hunger and weariness to give spiritual help to a Samaritan woman. But he never put things, even though they were sacred things, above the needs of men, even the common physical needs.

The principle is a far-reaching one. If Jesus is right, the principle has most important applications to the problems that face us today. Are we champions and defenders of institutions—the church, the ordinances, traditions, buildings—or of men? Are we giving our lives to perpetuate the things that the past has created for its needs, forgetting to ask whether these things still serve today's needs; or are we thinking of living men, and testing the value of every institution that has come down from the past—in the last analysis all institutions are an inheritance from the past—by its power to serve the present needs of living men? The past has transmitted

to us institutions and things of inestimable value. We can never plead Jesus' example for a reckless iconoclasm. But, after all, dead men are dead, and the dead may be left to bury their dead. It is with living men that we are concerned, and the only test of the value of an institution is its capacity to serve the men of the present and the men of the future.

The principle is of wide application. Is it men or things which the leaders of this generation are counting as supremely valuable? Are we sacrificing men to pile up capital and found fortunes and build monuments; or are we recognizing that the only true value in the world is in men, and that the only legitimate use of capital or institutions is that they may serve men? To give one's life in a spirit of patriotism, to defend a government to the end that that government may transmit its blessings to future generations—this is in the spirit of Christ, who gave his life a ransom for many. But what shall be said of the estimate of men that leads to the reckless sacrifice of human lives, or even of human comfort or human happiness, to the end that one may increase a fortune and write one's name among the men that have achieved things? In the onward march of civilization, many a private and many a general must fall by the way, as sooner or later all must end their earthly careers. To die is not to have lost one's life. To have led men to death is not necessarily to have counted their lives of little value. But to deprive little children of the opportunity to see the sun and the grass and the flowers; to cramp and narrow and dwarf their development; to keep men and women toiling at tasks that leave no time or energy for the things that beautify and ennable and dignify human life; in short, to prevent the development of human souls and the realization of their nobler possibilities—and all this that the capital of the world may be larger, that the material glory of modern life may be more splendid—is this what modern civilization is doing? If it is, and in so far as it is, it is pagan and not Christian. Things were made for man, not man for things. This is Jesus' philosophy of human life. The world has not yet learned to apply it in practice.